

Enhancing alignment among course policies and student outcomes: Assessing participation and offering make-ups as micro-cases

Abstract:

Engaging students in the classroom has never been more important, or more challenging. Educators, too, express experiences of burn-out and frustration with students' disengaged behaviors. One contributor to student disengagement is students' perceptions of inequity and unfairness in course policies. Drawing on Biggs' (1996, 2014) constructive alignment assessment process, participants will consider the extent to which important course policies align with their learning goals and student outcomes, using examples of assessing participation and offering make-up or alternative assignments. Participants will come away with new ideas and ways to make course policies more effective and increase student engagement and learning ownership.

Session type: PDW

Session time: 60 minutes

INTRODUCTION

Engaging students in the classroom has perhaps never been more important, or more challenging, particularly as a result of the learning losses and student trauma associated with the COVID-19 pandemic (Bisoux, 2022; Brammer & Clark, 2020; Grim, Bausch, & Lonn, 2022). Educators, too, express experiences of burn-out and frustration with students' disengaged behaviors (Anonymous, 2022; Gewin, 2021; Schroeder, 2021). Both of these factors lead to re-considering 'old' ways of managing issues with common learning assignments. In this active PDW session, I will engage participants in sharing strategies that are designed to increase students' ownership and choice and decrease educators' need to arbitrate within two common classroom learning issues: assessing participation and offering make-up or alternative assignments. At this 50th anniversary juncture for the MOBTS, I want to engage session participants by understanding their own experiences with classroom management issues and policy design, and share strategies I have gained from many past MOBTS conferences, re-assessing those strategies for currency in our vastly changed teaching and learning contexts.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES & SESSION ENGAGEMENT

In this PDW session, participants will:

1. Learn the theoretical foundations of classroom management practices and policies on student learning, and higher educational trends toward disengagement that challenge what we know and do;
2. Consider a live example of how students may challenge long-standing course policies, using my policies about grading participation and offering make up assignments and exams;
3. Select an example from their own courses, delineate their desired outcomes from that policy, and assess the level of alignment between desired outcomes and actual experiences;
4. Brainstorm new ideas about course policies and consider new ways of structuring important policies to enhance student engagement and learning outcomes participants want.

Using whole group, small group, and nominal group technique (Delbecq, van de Ven, & Gustafson, 1975; Van de Ven & Delbecq, 1974), participants will have an opportunity to share information directly relevant to their teaching practices and develop new ways of engaging student learning. Session participants will consider their overall course policies and procedures—why they design course policies the way they do – and assess fit among policies and their teaching and learning goals. Using my participation and make up assignments policies as an example, we will discuss the extent to which those policies match my goals, consider benefits and drawbacks to the policies in practice, using student feedback data, and suggest new options.

The session is designed for educators at any career stage, and participants will come away with a process for examining alignment among course policies and their teaching and learning goals, and examples of workable policies that fit their pedagogical styles and goals, reducing their need for trial-and-error course designs.

PDW OVERVIEW & ACTIVITIES PLAN

The 60 minute session will be structured as follows:

Activity	Time used	Total time elapsed
Introductions of facilitator and participants Brief session agenda and goals	10 minutes	10 minutes

<p><i>Issue description</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Theory base: Constructive alignment & matching policy to philosophy • Student and higher education trends • Catalyst examples from facilitator: goals for structuring them as they are, student feedback and experiences, recent challenges about inclusiveness and COVID-19 needs 	15 minutes	25 minutes
<p><i>Nominal group then whole group</i></p> <p>Assess alignment between facilitator's goals and policies in action in facilitator examples [worksheet in Appendix C]</p>	10 minutes	35 minutes
<p><i>Small groups</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants share examples from their own courses • Discuss participants' course policies and how/to what extent they align with participants' own goals and learning objectives 	15 minutes	50 minutes
<p><i>Whole group debrief</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What did they find in their own courses? • How might policies be adjusted to better enact educator goals? • What adjustments can be made to recognize student diversity and better inclusiveness practices? 	10 minutes	60 minutes

Brief theoretical framing

Overlapping trends are buffeting higher education, all with impacts on course design and policy choices, pedagogical choices, and student learning experiences. One contributor to student disengagement is students' perceptions of inequity and unfairness in course policies (Fornaciari & Lund Dean, 2014; Lund Dean & Fornaciari, 2014). Classrooms are more diverse than ever (Tomkins & Ulus, 2016), with vastly heightened attention to the need for more inclusive educational practices (Faulkner, Watson, Pollino, & Shetterly, 2021). Student diversity challenges educators to create 'blanket' policies and rules that are equitable and honor different student backgrounds. Additionally, due to COVID-19 students are coming to higher education

less prepared than before, unsure of their abilities (Alemany-Arrebola, Rojas-Ruiz, Granda-Vera, & Mingorance-Estrada, 2020) and carrying learning losses, educational and life trauma (Davidson, 2020). Many students took over family member caregiving or wage earning responsibilities during the pandemic, and retained those responsibilities. All of these trends have led to perceptions of student disengagement, and none is getting less complex, and will not just go away as the virus becomes normalized (Goudzwaard, 2021; Schroeder, 2021).

Educators can be more effective by periodically re-examining course policies to assess how they serve student learning outcomes, classroom management effectiveness, and alignment with educator learning goals (Beatty, Leigh, & Lund Dean, 2020; Biggs, 2014) as students increasingly bring different perspectives and readiness for learning into our classrooms. Longstanding course policies, such as attendance requirements, late work policies, missing assignment or exam make up policies, or course marking schemes have direct effects on students' learning, engagement, and classroom experience (Lund Dean & Fornaciari, 2014).

Class participation

Many engaged educators include some form of class participation in student learning requirement in management courses. Encouraging quality student discussion contributions and assessing them equitably are perennial management educator challenges (Czekanski & Wolf, 2013). Students' participation in the classroom is among the most researched topics within the student engagement and active learning literatures (Weaver & Qi, 2005). Participation quality and quantity are affected by many factors including class size, educator practices of classroom control and authoritative presence, and student age/experience (McKee, 2015). Centrally important to student participation rates and quality is the opportunity for participation that

students perceive (Dallimore, Hertenstein, & Platt, 2013; Weaver & Qi, 2005) and the student—educator relationship (Czekanski & Wolf, 2013). Opportunity for engaging with course content can take many forms, and originate with either the educator or the student. Opportunity perceptions are also influenced by how authentic students believe the educator values their opinions and critical assessments (Rocca, 2010).

Student participation is a key learning tactic to increase engagement, critical thinking, and practice at both sharing considered viewpoints and being able to integrate others' questions or opinions (Rocca, 2010). However, grading student participation represents a challenge to perceptions of fairness among students (Czekanski & Wolf, 2013). The policy I have used for many years originated during graduate studies when a group of students challenged the 'routine' learning rationale for structuring participation as a class requirement, and has evolved to intentionally offer student choice and agency. Appendix A includes policy language for how attendance and participation are marked.

Make up options for missed exams, class sessions and assignments

There are many reasons why students miss assignments and class sessions, and most do not realize how that affects educator workload when they request make ups (Zarick & Stonebraker, 2009). Missed assignments and students' requests for make ups can also put the educator in an arbiter role, deciding which reasons are 'approved' or 'unapproved.' Students' lives are complex, and they have all manner of responsibilities that might result in missing assignments or class sessions, such as work, family responsibilities, participating in college athletics, and job interviews or networking opportunities. They may be sick, or awaiting test results, impacting their ability to finish assignments and attend in-person class sessions.

I have created make up and missed class policies that respond to the variety of possible explanations for absence or missed work, and move ownership and choice over make up options to students. One major policy goal is to not have to decide excused or unexcused absences or misses; students know these policies up front. While they have ‘worked’ for many years and I believe they are equitable, this past term a student strongly disagreed with how make up work would count when he missed multiple classes and assignments due to tending to a family member in hospice care. Because of this, I wanted to engage MOBTS conference session participants in helping me re-consider this policy, given my learning goals and course philosophy. Appendix B includes policy language for how make up exams and assignments will go, and how missed class sessions can be made up.

Appendix C includes the alignment worksheet participants will use during the session, modified from Biggs (1996, 2014).

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APPENDIX A: COURSE PARTICIPATION POLICY AND GRADING

Class attendance and participation will be worth 210 points toward your final grade. As partners in learning, we each have responsibilities for each class period. I have prepared an interactive and (hopefully) engaging set of activities for which your reading and pre-class preparation are critical.

Points will be distributed in this way: each class period is worth 10 attendance & participation (A&P) points; we have 21 class periods together where discussion is the plan! You get 6 for just attending. The other 4 points are earned through your active participation in course discussions. Note 2 things here:

- Attendance and participation are not the same things
- If you simply attend but do not actively participate in course discussions, you will receive only 60% of possible points for A&P, which is a D grade.

In-class & synchronous participation is usually verbal. Every single semester I get feedback that your peers want you to speak up, so please do! There are, however, other ways to offer your viewpoints about course material. I welcome your critical thinking about course topics in a variety of ways, adding your views to the discussion to earn participation points. Consider contributing to the course:

- sending me post-class email with your reactions to class time
- participating in Moodle forums set up throughout the semester
- finding articles relevant to topical material and giving me a short write-up of how course material is being applied
- creating a short video of yourself sharing your thinking
- creating a screencast or podcast sharing your reactions to the materials
- responding to a blog that is relevant to course topics
- authoring or editing a Wikipedia page that is relevant to course topics
- recording a discussion from your group critically examining a course topic
- I welcome your ideas

If you must miss a class period, you are welcome to use alternative participation methods to earn back up to 8 class session points.

APPENDIX B: MAKE UP EXAM AND ASSIGNMENT POLICY

I offer make ups for missed [assignments & written exams] as an oral exam, because I want to discourage students from missing those. Please contact me to schedule a time to sit for this exam. Sooner is better than later since the material is fresher for you.

Let me encourage you to turn in work even if it's late. You earn 50% of the graded points for late work. For equity reasons: work that's incomplete or is the incorrect file counts as late, so please make sure you're handing in the file you want to hand in.

APPENDIX C: ASSESSING ALIGNMENT BETWEEN GOALS AND POLICIES IN PRACTICE (modified from Biggs, 1996).

Course policy brief description	Policy goals: What do you want to achieve with this policy?	Policy experiences: What has happened with student outcomes when using this policy?	Policy assessment: How do you know what is happening with the policy?	What could you change to make the policy more aligned with your goals?